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THOMAS S. PEIRCE HOMESTEAD

MIDDLEBOROUGH'S MILITARY RECORD

by

Maude B. Skillings

The early settlers of Middleborough were largely sons and grandsons of the Pilgrims, so it is not strange that many a name which acquired renown by its service in the early scrimmages with the Indians and later in French and Indian wars can be found again and again in the brief records to which the writer has access.

Among the most noteworthy is that of Fuller. No list of soldiers is complete without the name Fuller even down to the present day. Some became Sgts., some Lts., Lt. Col. etc. The latest Stanley Fuller Bailey is stationed on the Pacific Island of Guam from WW II.

In the list of those who served in the French and Indian War, I found it very interesting to note the names of Capt. Samuel Thatcher and Adj. Oxenbridge Thatcher, sons of Rev. Peter Thatcher of the First Congregational Church at the Green. They had served faithfully and well.

As every boy and girl of English parentage is supposed to know, Middleborough was incorporated as a town in 1669. Until fifty years after this date, there was but one military company. In 1727, the population had so increased that this was divided into two, called foot companies 1st and 2nd respectively. The town was divided into two precincts and further divisions became necessary in 1754. Governor Hinckley said in 1689 that besides the commissioned officers, there were 570 able and effective men in the colony, and in the town of Middleborough, 44, but their names were not listed. More attention began to be given to uniforms and arms. A new uniform of white, faced with scarlet was designed and accepted. A good firearm with a steel or iron ram rod and worm, priming wire and brush, bayonet fitted

to the gun, a cartridge box holding at least 15 rounds of ammunition, six flints, a pound of powder, forty leaden bullets, a haversack, a blanket and a canteen holding at least a quart of water constituted the required equipment.

Time went on and men were called to join the military companies, of which there were now four, in brief engagements. Relations between this country and England became more and more strained until, after the Battle of Lexington, the country realized the time for independence had come and we find the following entry in the town records showing Middleborough's attitude:

"May 20, 1776, said town did then give their vote and signify their mind whether if for the safety of the United Colonies, the Honorable Congress should declare them independent of the Kingdom of Great Britain they, the said inhabitants will solemnly engage their lives and fortunes to support the measure. Voted and allowed by the town to support the measure."

This might be called the First Declaration of Independence as far as Middleborough was concerned, and we all know how well it was sustained. Many interesting and some amusing incidents could be recounted, but space does not permit. Deborah Sampson's experiences alone would make a fascinating chapter in any novel.

The next great conflict was the War of 1812, in which Middleborough did valiant service. See the list of Middleborough men in the Mexican War and at the Battle of The Alamo! ! We have no reason to blush for Middleborough in any period of her history.

For what she did in the Civil War, let the following story give a creditable finish:

Not long ago a written record of Co. C, M.V.M. was placed in my hands by Miss Nellie Bennett. I am using such excerpts as are relevant to this article.

The Company at the time of mustering into the service was composed of 68 men from Middleboro; 14 from Lakeville and five distributed from Easton, Plymouth (2), Bridgewater and Stoughton; a total of 87 men. It was mustered out August 28, 1863, 14 having died in service.

In April, 1896, twenty-one of those surviving met in Middleborough and formed an Association. They voted to hold reunions annually in June. There were 22 other survivors, but they never seemed to have joined the Association.

The Association continued to hold reunions with ever-dwindling attendance. Grover Bennett was secretary during the past several years until July 1924, when this pathetic entry closed the record: "No meeting today. Only 3 members left, C. E. Peirce, Dura T. Weston and Grover Bennett. T. V. Finney died this year. I attended his funeral in Plymouth today. Grover Bennett."

George Washington Thomas, who lived past his 101st birthday, was the last survivor of Middleborough's Veterans of the Civil War.

THOMAS SPROAT PEIRCE

A Factual Fantasy

by

Clinton E. Clark

The oil lamp spluttered and its dancing flame cast eerie shadows upon the walls and ceilings. The elderly grocer bent to its light as he closed out his accounts for the day.

He set the lamp on a crate while he drew a quart of vinegar for his last customer, seeing no reason to keep more than a single light for the few stragglers who came in after the help had departed.

Picking up the tumbler of oil that held the flaming wick, he took a last look around the store. The light caught the pale gleam of yardgoods on the shelves, reflected the eyes of the store cat waiting for the first mouse to venture out, and dissolved in the deep shadows at the rear of the big room. So long had it been familiar to him, the mixed smell of vinegar, molasses and kerosene and the dusty, persistent odor of time gone by, went unnoticed.

As he went to the front door to give it a final jiggle, he heard the heavy footfall of the night watch and, peering out, raised a hand to the constable to assure him that all was well with Thomas Sproat Peirce and his domain.

He could see across the street to the empty corner lot and knew without looking that on its north side the stately home of the Peirce family stood dark and silent in the night.

If mounting the stairs by a tiny oil lamp and retiring was a lonely thing, he nevertheless valued the brief hours of repose, for his business ventures extended far beyond his store and demanded his full attention. He would not live to see the full fruition of his years of labor but he would give his home town lasting evidence of his enterprise. He died when the tree-lined streets of Middleborough were aflame with the bronze and gold of autumn, September 16, 1901, a legend in his own time.

The legend was fresh in the memories of those who knew him and they recalled his wearing the same suit of pepper-and-salt clothes, and the same old fashioned plug hat the year round. They said the suit was renewed from time to time but no man remembered when the hat was new. His apparel, we might say, bespoke the conservative personal habits and frugality of the man who bequeathed Middleborough half a million dollars.

People remembered his aversion to spending money for lights in his store, as we have mentioned. Yet he ran the finest emporium of its kind in this part of the country. They knew him as a kindly man though shrewd in counting pennies. His pockets were his only till and he held mortgages on many nearby farms.

Thomas Peirce gave long term credit and accepted notes in good faith and nobody ever accused him of being severe with delinquents. He simply did business in the old time way. He lived by the Golden Rule and expected others to treat him as he tried to treat them. He outlived his brothers and spent his declining years in the family mansion across the street from the

store. The Peirce family name died with him but one of his last acts was to insure that it would live forever in the annals of his town. Townfolk were staggered when the generosity of his will was made known.

From the foregoing, one might conclude that for all of his exemplary traits, Thomas Peirce was given to eccentric ways. The conditions of his will might support such a conclusion and yet there was, from his point of view, sound reasoning behind the terms which put the vast fortune (for those times) in the hands of a board of trustees.

While the money was to be used for improving his native town, he left its spending in the hands of three citizens rather than entrust it to public officials. Thomas Peirce was said to have little faith in town officials, not as individuals, but in their official capacity.

Today, if he could return, he would probably view Middleborough with mixed emotions. He would be proud, no doubt, of the beautiful public library built with his money and would endorse the wisdom of his trustees for maintaining such a fine place for public use.

Down on North street, where his family once owned farm acreage, he could see the high school and perhaps it would be discreet not to tell him that the first time his trustees offered to build a new high school, the offer was summarily rejected by the town, mainly on the grounds that the upkeep would be too high. Most folks have forgotten that by now anyway.

Behind the school he could see where more of his money was wisely invested. The playgrounds, swimming pool and athletic fields were made possible through his sale of groceries, cotton goods, hardware, and New England rum, not to mention his other sources of revenue.

On Jackson street we would explain that his estate has given all the land on the left side of the street to the town, and tell him how his barns behind the old store still stood there until last year.

The store itself, where he dispensed his groceries and other commodities, now dispenses justice and the line of quaint old houses will soon fall under the auctioneer's hammer so the young people can have a skating rink, and the town more parking space.

It might be well to detour him around Center street to avoid explaining how his father's beautiful academy, one of the finest buildings in the old town, is long gone except for a pair of circular windows that were discovered by Mrs. Gilbert Campbell in the attic of the old Martinique, and are now, more thanks to her generosity, preserved in the Association's museum in the library.

It would be quite a tour, and at that we might overlook many things the Peirce Estate has given to improve the town of Middleborough.

We have a feeling that if he saw his old store desk and those windows from the academy, stored in the library, he might ask that something be done about a museum, but otherwise we feel that he would be content with the wisdom of his plan. Certainly he would endorse the manner in which his trustees have administered his estate.

This is the man who gave the town a $50,000 library because he thought his brother would have liked it, and then donated $50,000 more for books. After that he asked the man who drew up his will, "How much is left?" When told he still had about half a million to dispose of he asked, "Where did it come from?" We have a feeling he knew the answer.

The next time we see youngsters splashing and shouting around the swimming pool, or sit in one of the new chairs in the Town Hall, or admire the spanking new uniforms of the Memorial High School Band, we will feel we know the donor a little better.

(Reprinted courtesy of the Middleboro Gazette as an outstanding contribution to permanent history.)

A TRIBUTE TO THE AMATEUR DIGGER

by

Robert L. Cushing

Many persons are inclined to look with scorn at the amateurs who, motivated by varied personal reasons, invade fields of science formerly left completely to the professionals. This is particularly true in the field of archaeology where it has been said that amateur diggers without formal training are apt to accomplish little beyond the destruction of priceless sites.

Dr. Maurice Robbins, director of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society in Attleboro and well known to Middleboro audiences, has recently published a complete report on the "diggings" at Lakeside in Middleboro (on the north shore of Assawampsett Pond—now designated as Wapanucket No. 6).

In his report Dr. Robbins praises the work of the amateurs connected with this project, many of them from Middleboro and surrounding towns, who took courses at the Society headquarters and made many minor excavations before the important site was discovered and worked. It is not, nor should it be, our intention to discuss their work on this site in detail, as impressive as the results have been. This has been told by Dr. Robbins and others before many an enthusiastic local gathering and is now well told in the official report.

Two important facts should be mentioned. First, these amateurs, working with adequate professional leadership, have discovered and made available information from which it can be definitely stated that in the period about 2300 B.C. there existed an Indian village on this site in present day Middleboro which may have contained as many as 100 persons living at least a semisedentary existence. The village was a place of some permanence to which they could return after roaming the forests during the winter. There was an abundant fish supply which together with a supply of birds and other small game offered a welcome change from their red-meat diet of the winter.

The village had one ceremonial lodge, larger than the rest, which was obviously used for the celebration of rites required by the religious beliefs of the occupants. Near by were the cremation platform and burial pits where those of their number who died were laid to rest.

Second, it should serve as a reminder to all who seek to work as an amateur in the collecting and preserving of information

about the past. One of the big lessons learned at Wapanucket No. 6 came not from any single post hole or artifact. It came through the efforts of no single person, amateur or professional. The large mass of material, gathered carefully and preserved correctly by interested persons was "translated" by others more skilled and better trained than the diggers themselves. From this combined effort came conclusions which threaten to completely revise man's understanding of sections of prerecorded history of our country.

For full details see the complete report in the Association library. But let this serve as an inspiration for those in our number who from time to time despair of their attempts to preserve Middleboro's history. Let us amass what we can and perhaps future students will "translate" and make public the real historic significance of our collections.

ACQUISITIONS

We have an accumulation of standing type in the acquisitions department for which there will never be room at the rate of recent acquisitions. Let me record for our readers a fine collection of documents, handbills, pamphlets and ephemera presented by Austin L. Beals. There is enough unprinted material in this carton to write a whole chapter when Weston's History is brought up to date, we hope, before 1969. Mss. notebook kept by his Father, Joseph E. Beals, as Treasurer of "persons who have associated themselves together for the purpose of erecting buildings for the George Woods Co., to occupy by lease or purchase at any time within ten years. . . " The first meeting and election of officers was held, and is dated, July 1883. The property accounts continue until November 18,

Mrs. Helen A. Bradford rescued a missing number of the Gazette for our files, and Mrs. Salley, executrix of the estate of the late Kendrick Washburn, contributed not only missing Gazettes, but the only extant copies of The Talk of the Town.

Alton Pratt has presented us with a scrap book collected by the late C. D. Kingman. It is inscribed on the front cover — "To be given to Barbara to keep until the 300th Anniversary of the Town of Middleborough." In addition to newspaper clippings, music, souvenirs and World War I ephemera, it contains a very interesting broadside.

"Dec. 29, 1828. Dedication and Sale of Pews.---/
The New Meeting House will be dedicated 6th January at 10 A. M.----------/
Pews will be sold at Public Vendue to the highest bidder
------ at 1 O'clock ------/
W. Bourne, Treasurer."

(With a complete floor plan and arrangement of pews with the names of the successful bidders in ink.)

Mr. and Mrs. William S. Robbins presented a prospectus of the proposed railroad from Plymouth to Middleborough dated 1889. Weston's history notes that this railroad was completed in 1892 and leased to the Old Colony.

We are grateful to Mrs. Mildred L. Stafford of Lakeville for a fine wash drawing of the old Peirce Store, executed about the same time as the one we borrowed from Fletcher Clark for the last issue. Although the scene is the same, there is more action. The artist seems to have caught an indefinable something that makes the picture look alive. Mrs. Stafford's gift also includes many fine photographs, one especially of the staff of Peirce Store, WITH the names carefully recorded on the back. If every photograph in every historical society and museum in the Country had a detailed list of the people, buildings, streets — even dogs, for some dogs like Mr. Fala of the White House have written better history than their masters — the lives of curators and historians would be far simpler and pleasanter. William R. Peirce's pictorial shaving mug with a stalwart bull's portrait in full color stands out on one of the shelves of the Pickens secretary desk like a bright stone in the dusty mine of history. Our small library welcomes the 1824 grammar used by Levi L. Peirce, and two small account books concerning one of the Pratt estates.

Mrs. Foster Stearns of Exeter, New Hampshire, recently sent us a copy of "New England Miniatures. 1750 to 1850," published by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Everett Pratt of Freetown, who recently gave us a painting of William R. Peirce (see Vol. 1, #2—notes by Theodore N. Wood), has contributed a fine old stereoscope with a set of Middleborough views.

Miss Nellie M. Bennett has presented us with another map, bounded by the South Indian Path and the North Indian Path, which I believe was drawn by her father. Though I have no authority for this conjecture, I base it on the story that when, as a little girl, Miss Bennett travelled about with him, she distinctly remembers a gadget on one of the wheels that clocked off distances and measurements which he recorded. I hope to have more data about this map for another issue.

According to Doris Stetson's mother, corroborated by Will Crapo, the row of maple trees back of the high school where Charlie's Rock* used to be, were set out by the Peirce Brothers years ago, and each one named for a member of the family. They are probably not all there now, but it seems as though this bit of folk lore should be on the record — and what better place than in the Antiquarian?

* See article in Volume one, number two, "Recollections of the Peirce Brothers" by William H. Crapo.

Bay State Historical League
Summer Meeting, June 18, 1960
Guest of the Royall House Association
15 George Street, Medford, Mass.

Lawrence B. Romaine — Ed.

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ACQUISITIONS CONTINUED

Austen L. Beals presented our archives with the following: Mss. notebook kept by his Father, Joseph E. Beals, as Treasurer of "persons who have associated themselves together for the purpose of erecting buildings for the George Woods Co., to occupy by lease or purchase at any time within ten years. . ." The first meeting and election of officers was held, and is dated, July 1883. The property accounts continue until November 18, 1885 — subscriptions, building costs, insurance, rents and various improvements — and then the curtain falls on a $15,000.00 investment. There seems to be no other record of this project.

One share of stock in the Domestic Needle Works of Middleboro dated February 1876. Shares were $100. each and the capital stock $40,000. A screaming American eagle decorates the certificate, and Coombs, the Printer, has further embellished it with a fine floral border.

A complete list of the shareholders in the Middleborough National Bank, dated May 1, 1890: — Middleboro shareholders 401, outsiders 99 — total 500 shares, $50,000. At this date the tax rate was $18.75 per $1,000.

A brochure issued by the Middleboro' Commercial Club in 1892. This gives the town statistics in detail. It is often said that comparisons are odious, but sometimes they are also interesting. Frankly, I'd swap my 1957 Chevrolet for an 1892 horse and buggy tomorrow.

Another pamphlet from the Beal's collection is the "Constitution and By-Laws of the Citizens' Improvement Association of Middleboro'." This was distributed in 1881. "Cultivating public spirit, quickening the social and intellectual life, securing public health and increasing manufactories" has a very familiar ring. It will still be ringing, loud and clear, when the first American colonists leave for Mars — and I question whether enough human beings will ever hear it to carry out these plans for the many, by the few.

Mrs. Helen A. Bradford of Thomas street rescued and presented a copy of the Middleborough Gazette and Old Colony Advertiser dated August 30, 1862 for our files, in answer to the notice in the Gazette. Mrs. Mildred H. Salley of North Main street, in the capacity of executrix of the estate of the late Kendrick Washburn, discovered and saved us the only copy I have been able to locate of The Talk o' the Town, a short lived competitor of our Gazette, born in the heat of politics in 1936, withering very quickly, and dead in the cool of the next administration's morning. Today's news is tomorrow's history. Whatever you find, don't throw it away until you make sure it won't be missed in the future.

We are further indebted to Wilfred Deane of Wood street for a manuscript account book kept in Freetown by W. Rounseville and J. Fearing from 1805 to 1806. Just where this old store was located is lost history. However, the daily sales of blouses and waists, axes and iron spoons, building materials for furnaces, rum, tobacco and tea for ancestors Ashley, Bonneys, Haskells and Rounsevilles have been rescued. The brandy, gin, rum and tea might even float the steamer Assawompsett again.

Middleborough historical records are coming home again, thanks to our friend and benefactor Miss Gertrude W. Dexter of Beverly, Mass., this time in the form of Miss Dexter's great great grandfather's diary from January 1803 to 1815. Mr. Levi Tinkham (Middleborough Antiquarian, Vol. 1, No. 4, page 1) was not considered of sufficient stature for mention in Weston's History. He was, however, clerk and treasurer of the town in his day, and at least locally, one of our outstanding citizens. This little carefully written account could easily fill five years of the Antiquarian. I will pull out just a couple of paragraphs to relieve the tension of historic facts.

In 1804 Mr. Tinkham set a hammer in Mr. Thomas Weston's forge and "put on a wild cat." It took him six and a half days for which he received $17.00, BUT he had to hire Squire Tinkham to help which cost him 3 shillings, nine pence a day plus a gallon of rum. In 1805 he built a hearse for which he was paid $44., plus $13. for the harness. The cost of materials was $15.35. I wonder what became of it. Again, in 1812, he built a hearse for the First Precinct in Middleborough, "to be built in the form of the one at Pembroke." In 1813 he built a machine to cut cider press screws. With this he traveled to Bridgewater, Mattapoisett and New Bedford clearing as much as $1.75 a day. His apprentice and Son learned his trade(s) at $55. a year with only general fast days and Thanksgiving off. How things have changed.

Mr. Tinkham didn't leave the town a half million dollars, but he served it well in many capacities, and surely deserves honorable mention in the next town history.

If this story really gets under your skin, and you'd like to see the old 7″ x 13″ iron bound oak lock in which Mr. Peirce turned the wrought iron key every night after the day's work, drop in at the police station and ask one of the force to show you the cabinet. Here you can also see one of the account books from the old store, and the barometer that Bill Briggs says still does a better job than Mr. Rideout and all the other modern weather oracles.

MIDDLEBORO. H. A. Sparrow, Rock Street

Mr. Sparrow and Mr. G. H. Shaw, under the firm name of Shaw & Sparrow, opened a paint shop in Middleborough, Mass., in 1852. Mr. Sparrow retired from the firm two years later, and conducted a business in his own name until 1860 when he formed a partnership with Mr. C. H. Rogers under the name of Rogers & Sparrow.

This business continued until 1864 when both men enlisted in the Union Army. Mr. Sparrow, being discharged, soon afterward returned to the painting business which he has conducted in his own name until the present time.

This short notice is reprinted from William E. Wall's **The Oldest Paint Shops in Massachusetts, published in 1910.** Ralph Sampson says that he well remembers running errands for H. Augustus Sparrow when he operated his paint shop in what is now Roger Tillson's barn on Rock street. Can anyone supply further information about the history of paint in Middleborough so glibly neglected by Mr. Weston?